



Internet • Democracy • Engagement

## Why 'hashtag activism' is not the solution for democratic inequality

Marc Hooghe, Jennifer Oser and Sofie Marien - 19 February 2015

### **The internet offers of swathe of new opportunities for democratic interaction, but how does this affect engagement levels among different groups?**

Across the globe, citizens increasingly use the internet to get their voice heard in the political process. The internet indeed offers a number of important advantages. First of all, the speed is remarkable. A few hours after the terrorist attacks in Paris in January 2015, across the world millions of people expressed their solidarity and concern using the 'Je suis Charlie' message. While in the past, setting up this huge international mobilisation effort might take days or weeks, this can now be done almost instantly. A second major advantage is that, in principle, almost everyone can be reached. The Office for National Statistics estimates that currently 84 per cent of all UK households have access to the internet. At first sight, this shows immense progress. One of the perennial problems in political participation research is that there are strong structural inequalities. While some citizens are well-connected and therefore easily mobilised, others have far fewer resources, and the odds that they will be reached by mobilisation efforts are much smaller. The end result is that the political system mainly will be confronted with the preferences and demands from those 'happy few', while it will tend to neglect the preferences of those who have fewer resources.

As is often the case when new technologies are being introduced, the use of the internet for political participation purposes has been greeted with high hopes. One might even say that there is a strong group of 'firm believers', who assume that the internet will become an important arena for future political participation. This expectation is correct to some extent: we can observe that for quite some people it has become a habit to express their opinions on the internet. Various consultation procedures now are also internet-based, and indeed this is associated with a smooth transition of information. So if one considers political participation purely as a process of exchange of information between citizens and the political system, almost self-evidently the use of internet can be seen as a major step ahead. But political participation should also be understood as a form of power struggle: specific groups in society want to voice their demands. This implies there is also a competition going on, as various groups make competing claims about the scarce resources of the government system. To paraphrase on one of the well-known books of the research team of Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry Brady: political participation is not just a matter of 'voice' but also a matter of 'equality'.

Does internet activism contribute to this form of political equality? Let us summarise it, by saying that the empirical evidence thus far is mixed. First, the good news is that especially

young people increasingly use the internet to get their voices heard. That is a positive trend, because it counteracts the alarming trend that, especially with regard to electoral participation, younger age groups tend to refrain from taking part in the process. The average age of party members is rapidly rising and even with regard to voter turnout there is a strong downward trend among younger age groups. There is a concern, therefore, that political parties and general elections will become an instrument that is used mainly by older and, to large extent, well-off and highly educated citizens. Developments that go against this trend, therefore, might balance the trend to some extent and make sure that the voice of young people too gets heard in the policy process. While for older citizens it still seems attractive to join party meetings, or to go to the polling booth to cast their vote, for younger age groups apparently this is seen as old-fashioned and they prefer to get their voices heard in an electronic manner. So, by itself, this can be seen as a positive development.

Gender is a second important source of political inequality. Even today, men still dominate electoral politics to a large extent and – especially in majoritarian electoral systems like the British system – this leads to a vast underrepresentation of women. For internet activism, too, this gender inequality was initially a major concern. The stereotype of the predominantly male group of technical nerds that would monopolise this medium was also clearly confirmed in some of the earlier studies. More recent studies, however, to a large extent alleviate this concern, and the most recent figures no longer show significant gender differences. To express it differently: especially among younger age groups, both for women as for men the internet has become equally attractive. Among older age groups, there might still be some differences between women and men in this regard, but for those under 30 these differences have all but disappeared.

The third major form of political inequality is based on socioeconomic status. That is a rather broad umbrella term that social scientists like to use to lump together differences with regard to education level, income and professional status. Methodologically, it is also correct that these indicators are taken together, because they are highly correlated: those with low education levels are more likely to have a low professional status (or to be unemployed) and they will also have a lower average income level. In the older literature, this form of socioeconomic inequality was mainly phrased in terms of access, as the lower-income groups indeed were not early adopters with regard to internet access. But if indeed 84 per cent of all households are now connected, this means that this form of inequality has been sharply reduced. So while theoretically everyone has access to the medium, in practice, we can observe very sharp differences with regard to the propensity to use the internet for political purposes. This form of inequality remains as salient as ever before. Various reasons have been invoked to explain this enduring form of inequality: a lack of cognitive involvement with politics, feeling less at ease with expressing oneself, or a lower level of political efficacy. All these elements most likely play a role and their contribution should be investigated further.

But for the time being the most pressing concern is that this inequality remains. Politicians sometimes feel inclined to say that the internet now can represent public opinion. If a lot of people express a similar opinion on Twitter or another social medium, politicians and other officials sometimes regard this as an expression of what the population wants. The available empirical evidence, however, shows this is not the case: the things we read on Twitter are mainly the opinions of highly educated and well-off citizens. From a normative point of view,

it would therefore be wrong to allow the opinions of this small and privileged group to determine policy decisions.

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